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ABSTRACT

One of the first steps psychologists can take toward making themselves indispensable in the schools is to actively participate in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of crisis intervention teams. Unless effective crisis intervention strategies are instituted, the educational process comes to a standstill. School psychologists need to play a key role at the district level in developing the very important policies and procedures that will assist schools with restoring equilibrium following a traumatic event and by being involved with the development and operation of district/school site crisis teams. Preparation for crises is a process, not an event. Information needs to be gathered from many sources, and then tailored to fit a particular community, district or school. However, there are a number of basics that need to be considered when developing crisis intervention or emergency plans. In districts that have inadequate or nonexistent plans, school psychologists can provide an invaluable service by proposing the establishment of a District Crisis Committee to develop a district plan for crisis intervention. Four functions and five considerations of a District Crisis Committee are examined. Eleven principles of psychological first aid and 10 suggestions for how parents can help their children following a crisis are provided. (JBJ)

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Chapter Twenty-Four

Making Psychology in Schools Indispensable: Crisis Intervention for Fun and Profit

Loeb Aronin

One of the first steps in crisis intervention is to get everyone's attention, which is the reason for the title of this article. One of the first steps psychologists can take toward making themselves indispensable in the schools is to actively participate in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of crisis intervention teams.

Children and adults are increasingly being stressed by traumatic events that are so powerful that they disrupt the coping ability of individuals, and/or the community as a whole. The impact of an act of violence, drive-by shooting, civil unrest, fire, earthquake or other natural disasters, disrupts the emotional equilibrium of children and adults. Unless effective crisis intervention strategies are instituted, the educational process comes to a standstill.

Characteristically, these crisis situations temporarily disrupt the normal functioning of a school, significantly interfere with the ability of staff members and students to focus on learning, have the potential for physical and/or psychological injury to students and staff, and receive considerable attention from the community and media. The services needed to ameliorate these situations are not mandated, but are crucial to the continuance of the instructional program because they help to restore the equilibrium of a school or classroom. These critical services include consultation, triage, crisis counseling, training of school staffs, referrals to community agencies, and the implementation of a crisis intervention plan.

School psychologists need to play a key role at the district level in developing the very important policies and procedures that will assist schools with restoring equilibrium following a traumatic event and by being involved with the development and operation of district/school site crisis teams. Board of education members, administrators, and the community readily recognize that psychologists are an invaluable resource. They assist students, teachers, administrators, and parents with meeting the challenges of the multitude of crises that disrupt the educational process. For example, when a serious crisis occurs at a school within the Los Angeles Unified School District, the superintendent can assure the media and the community that a district crisis team of psychologists, counselors, and nurses will be at the school to deal with the tragedy.

Preparation for crises is a process, not an event. Information needs to be gathered from many sources, and then tailored to fit a particular community, district, or school. However, in our experience, there are a number of basics that need to be considered when developing crisis intervention or emergency plans. It is hoped that

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the following information will provide food for thought, discussion, and action.

Background

School psychologists in the Los Angeles Unified School District have been *formally* involved in crisis intervention since 1984 when a sniper crouched on a roof top and opened fired on an elementary school yard, killing one child and injuring twelve others. After that crisis, District personnel realized that staff were ill-equipped to deal with the psychological problems of students, staff and parents that accompany such an incident.

Although school personnel have had to deal with many crisis situations in the past, it became evident that specific plans needed to be in place at each school so that personnel involved with crises are prepared to deal with a variety of crisis related issues. These include actions during the acute phase of the crisis, such as quickly moving students into a safe environment, communicating with bilingual students and their parents, releasing students to their parents, and helping teachers assist students at the onset of an incident. Additional interventions are called for in following days, including identification of resources administrators can tap to obtain the assistance of additional reliable personnel, identification of students who will need additional assistance, debriefing, and additional staff training.

As a result of the sniper incident, a District Crisis Committee, comprised of the directors of each of the support services, was formed and a plan emerged to train regional teams to respond when schools need additional support during a crisis. The regional teams were trained in the various aspects of crisis intervention, and in turn were charged with training school site teams. Psychological services personnel took the lead in these endeavors. Principals were advised to contact the Coordinator of Psychological Services for consultation regarding a crisis, or to request additional support personnel when warranted based on the magnitude of the crisis. Psychological services personnel developed a *Handbook for Crisis Intervention* (1994) to provide support services and school staffs with valuable information about crisis intervention.

How Can School Psychologists Help?

The training, skills, and experiences of school psychologists prepare them to assist school districts with the development and implementation of district-wide crisis intervention plans. Responsibilities of school psychologists should include the establishment and training of school site crisis teams, and the coordination of assistance from non-school site support services personnel when school site teams are overwhelmed by the magnitude of the crisis. School psychologists also need to take the lead in establishing broad based teams of nurses, school counselors, social workers, child welfare, and attendance workers.

In districts that have inadequate or nonexistent plans, school psychologists can provide an invaluable service by proposing the establishment of a District Crisis Committee to develop a district plan for crisis intervention. In fact, they should volunteer to chair the committee.

District Crisis Committee

This district level committee would provide the following functions: (a) serve as the link between the district's senior staff support service units on matters pertaining to crisis intervention; (b) assess district needs and establish annual goals and objectives in crisis intervention; (c) plan and organize district wide meetings to provide direction and training for central office and itinerant personnel; and (d) oversee development and preparation of appropriate crisis intervention publications and materials.

Responsibilities of this committee should also include the establishment of district policies and procedures and the development a crisis handbook that would provide information regarding the

formation of school site crisis teams and strategies that staff should use to assist students and adults following a traumatic event. Sample lesson plans and parent information, should also be included in the handbook.

School psychologists should ensure that each school has an established crisis team by requesting the names of each school team member. Psychologists need to include in the district plan a schedule for training all of the school site crisis teams and participate as a member of the training team.

The following should be considered when establishing school site teams:

1. A school crisis team should be established under the direction of the principal in each school.
2. Membership on the team includes on-site staff as well as support services personnel assigned to the school. A typical team might be formed from staff members such as an administrator, counselor(s), nurse, psychologist, physician, attendance counselor, teacher(s) and classified staff. The number of members assigned to the team may vary from school to school.
3. The school team is a *team for all reasons*—that is, for all types of crises. There is not a separate team for mental health crisis intervention, suicide prevention, etc.
4. The function of the school site crisis team is to assist the principal in: (a) assessment of the need for crisis intervention services as a result of a particular crisis situation; (b) initiating the school's action plan; (c) providing appropriate intervention services; (d) determining the need for assistance from the district support services crisis team; and (e) evaluation of outcome.
5. Members of the school site crisis team should meet periodically to update their knowledge and skills on crisis intervention techniques, materials, and procedures (*Handbook for Crisis Intervention*, 1994).

Psychological First Aid in Schools

This term was adopted by the district to draw a parallel between the physical interventions provided by *lay* people when there is a medical emergency and the psychological interventions that administrators, teachers, staff, and students can provide following an emotionally traumatic event. In both situations, appropriate planning and training is necessary to be successful.

General principles of psychological first aid include:

1. Provide immediate, direct, active, authoritative intervention.
2. Recognize people in crisis as in a temporary state of disturbance, not mentally ill.
3. Communicate a sense of self-confidence.
4. Communicate in a calm organized way; help limit disorganization and confusion.
5. Provide accurate information about the situation.
6. Accept every person's right to his/her own feelings.
7. Attempt to calm the victim and relieve the anxiety and stress, but do not make unrealistic promises.
8. Accept a person's limitations as real.
9. Do not impose your methods of problem-solving upon the disaster victim; the person's own solutions will be most successful.
10. Listen actively.
11. Accept your own limitations in a relief role; do not attempt to be all things to all people (*Handbook for Crisis Intervention*, 1994).

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Assistance Parents Can Provide

There are many activities or strategies school psychologists can suggest to parents to assist their child to deal with traumatic events such as the death of a playmate, fire, earthquake or acts of violence. The following are among the most effective techniques:

1. Talk with children and provide simple, accurate information to questions. Allow them to tell their stories about what happened.
2. Tell them about your feelings.
3. Listen to your children for signs of fear, anxiety, or insecurity.
4. Be aware of any changes in behavior such as sleep patterns, eating, physical complaints.
5. Reassure your child by telling him/her, "we are together" or "we will take care of you."
6. Respond to repeated questions. You may need to repeat information and reassurance many times.
7. Hold and comfort the child.
8. Spend extra time putting children to bed, talking to them and reassuring them.
9. Observe your child at play. Frequently children express feelings of fear or anger while playing with dolls, trucks, or friends.
10. Provide play experiences to relieve tension.

Summary

By increasing involvement in crisis intervention teams, psychology increasingly will be viewed as indispensable in the schools. In brief, you now have a strategy that can guide you and your district in establishing and training regional and school site crisis intervention teams that include psychologists in substantive roles. A brief model for developing a district-wide plan was presented with a rationale for why psychologists need to play a critical role in the development of district-wide crisis intervention plans, and, for no extra charge, 11 important principles of psychological first aid were provided so that the training of staff can begin. Finally, specific suggestions for parents were included so that the next time the media calls and asks how parents (or teachers, for that matter) can help their children following a crisis, you have an answer.

Reference

Los Angeles Unified School District. (1994). *A Handbook for Crisis Intervention* (rev.). Los Angeles: Author.